

When Music Becomes Noise: Sound and Music That People in Barcelona Hear but Don't Want to Listen to

Josep Martí

Barcelona has particular characteristics that often make people consider it a noisy city. It is large, with one-and-a-half million inhabitants living in a relatively small area, which makes it one of the most densely populated cities of Europe. Furthermore, Barcelona's mild climate permits extensive life outdoors, and it has a high density of motor traffic. City officials deny that Barcelona is a noisier city than comparable ones like Rome, Milan or Madrid, for instance. Regarding acoustic pollution, it is not easy to make comparisons, but the fact is that according to the first sonic map of Barcelona, which was made between 1985 and 1990¹, 47.4% of the surface of the city was exposed to more than 70 dBA.

Although city officials try to relativise the problem, at issue is that the inhabitants of Barcelona are fully convinced that they are living in a noisy city. "A few days ago I was in London and could verify that a large city does not necessarily imply noise. London is much quieter than Barcelona", a person recently stated in a letter to the editor in the principal newspaper of Barcelona (*La Vanguardia*, 1 Aug. 1997:2, central section). Barcelona, like every large city, has a rather varied soundscape, including some traditional and also natural sounds. However, church bells are scarce and of bad quality; the sound of the carillon of the town, a splendid instrument of 49 bells, is gobbled up by the loud acoustic pollution of the streets. Nor does the squawk of seagulls near the harbour or the sound of other birds that colonize the trees of the city serve to give a definite acoustic personality to Barcelona. The inhabitants of Barcelona tend to identify their city strictly with noise. People have sometimes spoken of the noise as "the *hecho diferencial* ('differential trait', or special characteristic) of Barcelona" (*La Vanguardia*, 21 May 1997:22). This comprises one of the main reasons the inhabitants of Barcelona give when they abandon their city en masse on the weekends or during holiday periods: to run away from the noise.

The acoustic pollution of cities is of a very diverse nature, but a good part of it is not attributable to things we may think of at first, such as industrial workshops, motor traffic or sirens from emergency services, but rather to music. Music is played that we are compelled to hear without wanting to listen. The inhabitants of Barcelona sometimes speak of "psychological torture" when they describe the piano exercises

executed by a neighbour (*La Vanguardia*, 19 May 1996:30), of “the torture of the music of the street”, referring to street musicians (Cerrillo 1997:3) or of “the environmental torture” that attacks them in every underground station, with their piped-in music (*ibid.*). Generally speaking, people very seldom relate the concept of music with torture, but sometimes this is the perception that some inhabitants of Barcelona have.

When we are speaking of a “musical event”, we allude to a unity of reference regarding the use of music which can be defined as the realization of a musical act in a given time and place. The concept is generalizing, and it does not make any distinction regarding the actors or the kind of musical manifestation. A concert is a musical event, as is the singing of children in school, or when young people listen to music on a car radio, or when a pedestrian whistles or uses a Walkman to make his walk more pleasant. The musical event implies then the updating of every kind of music, which can happen in a collective ambience or in a personal manner, in life or through recordings (Martí 1995:43–44).

In this manner, the piped-in music of the underground of Barcelona is a musical event as is the music of the street musician who plays for the coins he receives from those passing by or the music that we hear from our teenage neighbour who turns up his stereo to full volume. These are only some examples of what we can designate *imposed musical events*, taking as a reference point the person who hears without wanting to listen. It is a category which deserves to be considered and analyzed, and which today constitutes an important element of the city’s acoustic pollution. And it is also easy to understand that the musical events’ characteristics and importance to the population will always depend not only on the particular kind of musical practices of a given society but also on the nature of the urban setting.

A city like Barcelona is full of musical events that are imposed on its inhabitants. “Everything from aesthetic contemplation in a concert hall to the mere act of turning on a radio or a sound recording in one’s everyday environment can be understood as ‘listening’” (Sterne 1997:25). But what happens if nobody has asked us if we really want to listen to this music? It is obvious that in this case the perception of these events will not be the same as with music that people want to listen to voluntarily. According to Attali, music dwells between noise and silence (Attali 1977:29), but in the case of the *imposed musical events*, the hearer does not care too much about the social codification through which noise becomes music, and probably the term “noise” will better define the sound he hears. These musics that wander freely through the streets of Barcelona also belong to the acoustic pollution of the city. In these cases, that which on other occasions would be perceived as “music” can easily be placed in the category of “noise”, and one of the main characteristics of the forced hearing of this noise is precisely the desire to ignore it.

We can state that the sensibility of Barcelona’s residents regarding noise has changed noticeably in the last several decades. Actually, from the 1970s until the present, environmental noise in Barcelona has undoubtedly improved. For some years, city officials have begun to give serious attention to the matter, as the develop-

ment of a sonic map of the city shows. But the inhabitants of Barcelona paid much less attention to environmental noise in the 1970s than now. At that time, they were more worried about the urban chaos that was propitiated by the building boom of the 1960s at the height of the Franco period or about cleaning the streets. We can recognize this readily in the letters people sent to newspapers, in which they expressed their complaints about the city. So, if we take as an example the most important newspaper of Barcelona, *La Vanguardia*, we observe that all during the year 1976, while letters complaining about dirtiness or the urban degradation of the municipal territory abound, only three of them—from a total of 1,327—allude to acoustic pollution.

Twenty years later, in 1996, the situation was quite different. Then in the section of letters to the editor of the same newspaper, we find 33—of 3,331—which protest against the noise in the city. Some of these refer to the noise produced by traffic, by air conditioning devices during the summer, by the shouting of neighbours or by streetcleaning during the night. But most of the complaints have to do with music that people must listen to without wanting to: the music of the instrumentalists who rehearse at home; the music that the neighbours of places such as discos or dance halls have to endure until very late at night; the music of street musicians; the piped-in music that people hear in the underground, big stores and offices; and there were even some letters complaining about the noise produced by the Walkmans of public transport users and by car radios turned up to full volume in the streets². In Barcelona, there are many occasions during which people can—or must—hear these imposed musics. By observing Barcelona’s reality, it is not difficult to determine the main situations in which we can speak of *imposed musical events*:

1. Music of popular festivals.
2. Music performed by street musicians.
3. Music of students or professionals while rehearsing at home.
4. Music generated by musical places like discos and dance halls.
5. Music generated by private electronic devices such as radios, stereos, etc.
6. Environmental music that is generally piped-in.

Clearly, we must understand all these situations as possible cases in which Barcelona’s people are forced to hear specific kinds of music without desiring to, i.e., they have nothing to do with the sources of those musics, which invade their own private spheres.

The first of these *imposed musical events* to be considered here is the music of popular festivals of different kinds. In Catalonia, as all over Spain, every town and village has its own *festa major*, a festival of religious origin (though today these have been largely secularised), which takes place once a year and last several days. This tradition is also maintained in Barcelona, where not only the entire city celebrates a *festa major* in September, but also each of the many quarters has its own fiesta on different dates. These festivals occur mainly in summer and fall, and they mostly take place outdoors in the streets and on the squares of the city. This all implies good doses of music and dance. Most of the time the music is transmitted through powerful

amplifiers which produce many decibels that can be measured not only within the site proper but also in the adjacent streets. These festivals are, moreover, accompanied by stalls and sideshows characterized by loud and uninterrupted techno music during most of the day.

But the festive calendar of Barcelona is not limited to these kinds of festivals. We also find other occasions during which the street is the main scenario of the fiesta. Sometimes it involves other traditional fiestas or the spontaneous celebration of the victory of a local football club. The latter always ends with loud fireworks and the concentration in the city center of thousands of supporters singing and shouting slogans related to their club. But the fiesta of *Sant Joan*, which takes place the night before the 24th of June, has a special significance related to the festive connotations of noise. This fiesta is marked not only by music and dancing throughout all Barcelona, with celebrants preferring open spaces, but also by the uninterrupted exploding of firecrackers. In fact, a week before the fiesta of *Sant Joan* takes place, it is already possible to hear such small explosive devices, set off by children and young people in a totally anarchistic manner, so that the soundscape of the city has at that time an unmistakable personality.

The fact that Barcelona is a city that clearly depends on the rhythm of work rather than on celebrating fiestas means that these festive manifestations cause more than minor inconvenience to its residents. It is not very pleasant to have to put up with outdoor music until very late at night, especially when people have to get up early the next morning for work. Nevertheless, the inhabitants of Barcelona do not complain very much about these kinds of manifestations. They know that these fiestas take place only on specific dates of the year and, above all, that they belong to the local tradition. In this way, those who have no interest in participating fully in the fiesta have no choice but to stoically bear the downpour of decibels enjoyed by young and more lively people.

The people of Barcelona know that noise is intimately bound to the idea of fiesta. People older than thirty still remember how Holy Week was celebrated in the city. If noise is the mark for festive behaviour, silence is the mark for mourning. When Holy Week was a religious event fully experienced by the inhabitants of Barcelona, the dominant feature of the city was silence. On Holy Thursday and Good Friday the bells of the churches remained silent; radio programmes adapted to the circumstances by broadcasting mainly "serious music"; and some even advised reducing street traffic to that which was strictly necessary in order to avoid, as much as possible, the emission of noise. In descriptions of the traditional life of rural Catalonia, we also find accounts of this traditional behaviour during Holy Week: "People believed that the stamping of cattle, the screeching of vehicles and the noise of any kind of work offended God and disturbed the sleep of Jesus in the grave. The cattle which unavoidably had to be driven outdoors could not carry any kind of bell" (Amades 1950-1956:II/739).

For the inhabitants of Barcelona, street musicians constitute another clear case of *imposed musical event*, given that they belong today to the urban landscape of the city.

During the last twenty years, their number has increased considerably. They play in the most central places of the city, predominantly in the old town. Given the preponderantly mild climate of Barcelona, people can hear them during most of the year. We find musics and musicians of every style: South American music, jazz, rock, folk, flamenco, Spanish guitar, tango or rap (with dancers included), classical music, opera singers accompanied by Music Minus One records, Catalan song or African percussion, in addition to occasional performances of foreign musicians who are only temporarily in Barcelona and can offer passers-by balalaika, Scottish bagpipe or Venezuelan harp music, for instance.

The professionalism of such musicians is highly variable, as they include students obtaining their first experiences as performers, retired musicians who want to earn some additional money, true professionals, and amateurs with a precarious domain of musical technique. The *Rambla*, for instance, the most emblematic street of Barcelona, becomes every day a vibrant scenario where musicians and other artists representing the most diverse genres and styles vie with each other for the same coins. When the musicians are good, passers-by who cannot resist the temptation to switch from ignoring to contemplatively listening form little circles around the performers and applaud enthusiastically at the end of each piece.

For residents living near to where the musicians play, this music constitutes mainly an undeniable nuisance, especially if the performers use powerful amplifiers in order to increase the volume or because such amplification is necessary for their instruments. Although municipal policy does not allow the use of amplifiers on the street, the rule is seldom abided. Sometimes neighbours, merchants and musicians agree on a timetable for music, but given the informal character of these performances (e.g., the musicians are not always the same and are in many cases simply musicians passing through Barcelona), it is very difficult to ensure compliance with any agreement. Sometimes such *imposed musical events* are even the reason that some residents choose to move (Cerrillo 1997:3). And for those who remain in their homes, the street music eventually changes their musical habits: "I have not listened to my own records at home for some years" said a man who is living in the old town of Barcelona (*ibid*).

Some citizens of Barcelona complain about the street musicians, arguing in a manner similar to the lawmakers of many European countries who in the past centuries have tried to hinder this activity (Schafer 1988: 89-91). However, it is clear that in contemporary Barcelona a generally favourable opinion toward these kinds of manifestations prevails. Within the cognitive orientation of the people, the streets of the city are not only to be moved through but also to be strolled, at least some of them. There is even in Catalan the verb *ramblejar*, which alludes to the main street of Barcelona and which has no other meaning than "to stroll through this street", the *Rambla*. The street musicians could not find, then, a better scenario for their performances. Their presence is sometimes even able to modify citizens' perceptions about some places of the city. For example, a concrete square of Barcelona was seen as an inhospitable place before street musicians arrived, whereby a journalist stated: "It is

pleasant to see Catalunya Square now full of people, after we have watched it dying not only on its borders, with inhospitable and ugly bank buildings, but also in its center proper, which had become a wounded desert" (Permanyer 1997:12).

A lot of Catalans know the proverb *Déu et lliuri d'un mal veí i d'un estudiant de violí* (God save you from a bad neighbour and from a violin student). Through this proverb, it is easy to see how typical the situation is when a person is forced to hear the rehearsals of a neighbour. The great majority of Barcelona residents live in flats. Given that builders until now have not provided acoustic insulation for apartments and that to do such work later is expensive and not always totally effective, many inhabitants of Barcelona suffer the intrusion of sounds from television sets, stereos or pianos of neighbours. During 1996, for instance, the section containing letters to the editor in *La Vanguardia* was the scenario of an exciting polemic about the nuisance produced by home musical rehearsals. In May of that year the first letter about this matter was published which triggered a long series of other letters expressing agreement or disagreement. The original letter complained about the "psychological torture" inflicted by a neighbour's daily practising of piano exercises and ended with the idea that the Spanish government should declare the sale of pianos to private individuals illegal, like the sale of weapons or drugs (*La Vanguardia*, 19 May 1996:30). Thirty-three letters followed, seven of which supported the complaint, while the others clearly rejected it.

In this series of letters, some spoke on the one hand of "psychological torture", "great insolence" or "pianistic terrorism"; on the other hand, people reminded readers of the need for practice held by all students and professionals and the inevitability of having to put up with this. They called for tolerance, patience and dialogue between close neighbours. But the most aggressive letters defending the music students did not hesitate to consider the persons who had written protest letters as "antimusical", "with little musical sensitivity", "ignorant", "intolerant" or "narrow-minded". It is important to note that all this controversy focused mainly on the practice of "serious music". If the complaints had been about instruments such as percussion sets or electric guitar, the entire situation would have been very different.

Nowadays, other clear sources of *imposed musical events* are without any doubt musical establishments such as bars, pubs, discos, dance halls, etc. In Barcelona today it is no longer possible to hear spontaneous singing in bars or taverns. Until the 1970s, however, this was still usual in some parts of Barcelona where taverns frequented by young people and students abounded. They sang a lot and loudly while consuming wine and snacks. But gradually this custom disappeared from Barcelona, above all because of changes in the leisure time habits of young people and also partially because of tavern owners, who did not always agree with such loud merriment. In the 1980s, it was still possible to find in some bars the sign "singing forbidden". Today this is no longer necessary. In the more conventional bars of Barcelona, what dominates acoustically is the television set, which is left on for most of the day. One seldom finds a jukebox in bars, while there are many slot machines, emitting their characteristic tunes while in use.

But in addition to the usual bars, Barcelona does not lack in discos, dance halls and the special *bar musical*. This kind of bar remains open until very late in the night and the canned music sounds without interruption in such a loud manner that it is very difficult to carry on a normal conversation⁴. In all these cases, the decibels produced at each location normally go beyond the walls and become an endless nightmare for the neighbourhood. According to some protests, the high volume occasionally threatens even the integrity of buildings, provoking fissures in the walls (*La Vanguardia*, 25 Sept. 1996:18). In Barcelona, complaints against this kind of acoustic pollution are quite plentiful, as is the discontent of people with the local authorities for not satisfactorily remedying this problem.

Related to this situation as well are those cases in which neighbourhoods are annoyed by loud private electronic devices, not only at home but also outdoors such as, for instance, at the always crowded beaches near Barcelona. We hardly find positive opinions which—as was the case in the musical events mentioned above—defend the position of the "noisemakers". They are mainly regarded as inconsiderate, care-free or only interested in economic profit, as in the case of musical establishments.

The *imposed musical events* involving piped-in music or the like are accepted by the inhabitants of Barcelona in a more stoic manner. But sometimes people do express disagreement with these musical impositions, such as in the following letter, which was addressed to *La Vanguardia*:

For several years we have been exposed to that musical bombardment in establishments and public or private offices which degrades all kinds of music to the category of acoustic pollution. And so I consider "Für Elisa" by Beethoven or "Eine kleine Nachtmusik" by Mozart, in only one voice and as electronically infamous sound on the phone when a caller is put on hold, to be acoustic pollution [...] (*La Vanguardia*, 24 Sept. 1996:22)

The music heard in some stores specialising in commercial products for young people may sometimes possess a certain aggressive character associated with the kind of music and its loudness. This music can be heard outside the store's doorway, also serving as advertising for passers-by. But generally speaking, given that the tendency in Muzak music is to avoid stridency and high volume in sound, most people accept these *imposed musical events* as something completely normal for our times.

Piped-in music shares with other kinds of *imposed musical events* the fact that they are all heard inescapably; they are musics which escape from our control. But if most *imposed musical events* presuppose the transgression of one's private space, piped-in music is rather perceived as a necessary, integral part of a public space. This is also one reason why piped-in music stimulates less animated adversion.

The opinions held by Barcelona residents about all these different sources of "noise" are thus very diverse. If very few people would censure the *imposed musical events* deriving from the fiestas of the city, it is not solely because they take place only on specific dates of the year but also because of the high value people attach to tradition. Nor are home rehearsals generally regarded in a negative manner. This attitude was very definite in the letters from *La Vanguardia* analyzed above. Some of

them clearly expressed the need to support the "musical culture" of the country, showing tolerance for these intrusions into our private sphere: "Thank God musicians like Casals, Larrocha, Mompou, etc., were lucky to have neighbours who loved music", wrote a person in one of those letters⁵. Something similar happens in the case of street musicians: people who agree with their activities are far more numerous than the few who complain about them. To play music on the street is seen as an example of popular urban culture which deserves all our sympathy and furthermore constitutes one more of the "cultural attractions" of the city (*La Vanguardia*, 4 Aug. 1996:23).

Very different are the above-mentioned cases of musical establishments and of the private, but loud, use of playback devices. Given that these situations do not imply the positive social values comparable to the other cases, people declare their solidarity much more readily with those who have to bear this kind of acoustic pollution. Finally, concerning piped-in music—this noise flow as ersatz for sociability (Attali 1977:225)—, negative criticism belongs rather to the minority. Moreover, in this last case, criticism mostly alludes to the right everyone has to choose for himself when music is to be heard, as well as to the "degradation" music suffers through this kind of treatment. The symphonic arrangements of well-known tunes and popular classics easily creates, as one person described to me, Mickey Mouse music. But as already stated, piped-in music is not considered a serious problem by most inhabitants of Barcelona.

The kind of intentionality of the sources of these *imposed musical events* is of course not always the same. The person who performs piano exercises at home or the little group that listens to a cassette player at full volume on the beach, for instance, play music for themselves. However, the range of audition can reach other people, who then experience this music as an *imposed musical event*. Muzak however involves music which is meant to be heard throughout its range of perception, which implies that in one way or another the potential audience has to be considered in the programming of that music. This may of course be important for the greater or lesser degree of aversion people can feel in these different situations.

In *imposed musical events*, involuntary hearing is placed at the opposite extreme to the contemplative listening characteristic of concert hall audiences. When the physical annulment of sound penetrating our own private sphere is not possible, the attitude of the person while hearing the sound is to ignore it, which can hardly be totally effective. The result is then an intermittent hearing in which the hearer passes—sometimes to his despair—constantly from inattention to the imposed music to conscious listening. This is, generally speaking, the kind of hearing characteristic of the situations depicted in this article and which every inhabitant of Barcelona knows very well.

Notes

- 1 We have to take into account that this sonic map was developed before the urban transformations experienced in Barcelona due to the celebration of the 1992 Olympic Games. At the time of this study, the new sonic map of Barcelona was not yet available.
- 2 Cf. *La Vanguardia*, "Letters to the Editor" of 4 June 1996:21; 12 Oct. 1996:20; 23 Oct. 1996:16; 24 Sept. 1996:22; 4 March 1996:50; 23 Nov. 1996:22.
- 3 Cf. *La Vanguardia*, "Letters to the Editor" of 1 June 1996:20; 18 June 1996:22; 23 June 1996:31; 17 June 1996:22.
- 4 Considering that in these kinds of establishments music sounds not for dancing but only in order to create an atmosphere, a significant number of even their own patrons feel that the music is played too loud. According to one survey made in several touristic localities of Catalonia in 1992, among those questioned living in the region, 32% were of the opinion that the music volume should be lower (S.P.A.A. 1992:23).
- 5 This person names famous musicians well-known to Catalan people: the cellist Pau Casals, the pianist Alicia de Larrocha and the composer Frédéric Mompou (*La Vanguardia*, "Letters to the Editor" of 9 June 1996:33).

References

- Amades, Joan
1950–56 *Costumari Català. El curs de l'any*. 5 vols. Barcelona: Salvat.
- Attali, Jacques
1977 *Ruidos. Ensayo sobre la economía política de la música*. Valencia: Ruedo Ibérico.
- Cerrillo, Antonio
1997 "Junio mes del ruido", *La Vanguardia*, 17 June 1997:1 and 3 (central section).
- La Vanguardia*
1996–97 "Letters to the Editor", 4 Mar. 1996:50; 19 May 1996:30; 1 June 1996:20; 4 June 1996:21; 9 June 1996:33; 17 June 1996:22; 18 June 1996:22; 23 June 1996:31; 4 Aug. 1996:23; 24 Sept. 1996:22; 25 Sept. 1996:18; 12 Oct. 1996:20; 23 Oct. 1996:16; 23 Nov. 1996:22; 21 May 1997:22; 1 Aug. 1997:2 (central section)
- Martí, Josep
1995 "Etnomusicologia, folklore e rilevanza sociale". *Musica/Realtà*, 48:33–51
- Permanyer, Lluís
1997 "La música da vida a la plaza". *La Vanguardia*, 8 April 1997:12 (central section)
- Schafer, Murray
1988 (1977) *Klang und Krach*. Frankfurt: Athenäum.
- S.P.A.A.
1992 *Percepció del soroll en les grans poblacions turístiques de la costa catalana* (report). Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, Departament de Medi Ambient.
- Sterne, Jonathan
1997 "Sounds Like the Mall of America: Programmed Music and the Architectonics of Commercial Space". *Ethnomusicology*, 41(1):22–50.